

****ATTENTION****

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MOUNTAIN SHEEP

The mountain sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) is considered one of the most desirable big-game trophies native to North America. Two subspecies—the Rocky Mountain and California bighorn sheep—inhabited Washington State after the last Ice Age but vanished between 1925 and 1930 because of diseases brought in by domestic sheep and competition from other domestic animals. California bighorn sheep were reintroduced in 1957; Rocky Mountain bighorns, in 1972.

Description

Mountain sheep are tawny-gray to brown in color, with a distinctive white muzzle and rump. Adult rams can weigh over 300 lbs.; ewes between 100 and 190 lbs. Both sexes have true horns. Horns of the male curl backward, forming a 3/4 curl after about 4 years. An old adult ram can have horns weighting as much as 30 lbs. Female horns are smaller and more erect.

Habitat

In Washington, two subspecies of bighorns originally occupied isolated mountain habitats east of the

Cascade crest. Rocky Mountain sheep were found historically in the Selkirks and Blue Mountains; California bighorns utilized the eastern Cascade slope and Okanogan Highlands. Today, transplanted stocks of California bighorn sheep are found in Yakima, Kittitas, Okanogan, Chelan, Ferry, Columbia and Asotin counties. Rocky Mountain sheep are found in Pend Oreille, Stevens, Asotin and Garfield counties. Preferred habitat of the sheep consists of grass-or shrublands in rocky and broken terrain. Open areas are preferred because they allow the sheep to see approaching predators.

Life History

Mountain sheep are social animals and almost always occur in "bands." Two to 20 rams will comprise a "ram band." Ewes and young are the major social groups among bighorns and form bands of 10 to 50 animals. Throughout the year, sheep feed on the most nutritious plants on their range. During the spring, the new growth of herbs is the most nutritious forage available; in the summer, their diet turns to grasses and herbs. During winter, when

forage is poor, the sheep eat grasses and shrubs as they are available.

Breeding occurs in late November and early December; lambs are born between April and June. Lambs are particularly vulnerable during the first weeks following birth when severe weather can lead to high mortality.

Management

The Washington Department of Wildlife has reintroduced bighorn sheep in about a dozen areas of eastern Washington. The current mountain sheep population in Washington is about 750 animals. Rocky Mountain bighorns number about 210, and California bighorns about 540. Washington mountain sheep populations are managed very carefully because they reproduce slowly and are very susceptible to parasites and disease. Hunting occurs in six management units with very restrictive trophy harvests. For specific hunting regulations, consult the Washington Department of Wildlife brochure, *Mountain Goat, Sheep, Moose, Cougar, and Lynx Hunting Seasons*.